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ABSTRACT

A survey of 34 professors teaching English as a second language in 20 Japanese universities elicited information about common errors in student writing. In open-ended questions, respondents identified 40 student error types, which were grouped into 18 categories. The most common problem category was sentence development, and other high-frequency categories, in descending order of occurrence, included subject-verb and number agreement, paragraph development, use of articles, and verbs. Implications for classroom instruction are considered briefly. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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English Writing Errors of Japanese Students as Reported by University Professors

John Izzo

Introduction

Writing is an important, but difficult to acquire, communication skill which is essential in today's information society. The level of difficulty is significantly higher when a foreign language is involved. Differences in the language structures, the manner of expressing thoughts, writing styles, and other culturally varying factors greatly affect the writings of a foreign (second) language learner. (Benson and Heidish, 1995)

Japanese learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) have problems coping with these differences. In general, Japanese students have great difficulty in developing the level of English writing skills that is expected of a college student. This is borne out by the TOEFL Test of Writing English (TWE) results attained by Japanese. From August 1993 through May 1995, the Mean score of Japanese who took the TWE test ranked 115 out of 117 when compared to test takers from other countries. (ETS, 1996) Moreover, this English language learning problem extends to other language skill areas as indicated by the ranking of Japanese TOEFL test takers during July 1996 through June 1997. Among test takers from 166 countries that included 25 Asian countries, Japanese ranked 151 and 23 respectively. (ETS, 1997)

Research studies have also documented the problems that Japanese students have writing in English. For example, a study that involved 25 randomly selected foreign students - five each from the five largest represented foreign language groups (Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Persian, and Spanish) enrolled in special sections of freshman composition was conducted at the University of Southern California. In this study, Japanese students produced writings that were ranked as the worst in rhetorical competency, had the most errors, and collectively generated the shortest collective corpus. (Kroll, 1991)

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In addition, many EFL teachers in Japan have conducted a variety of research pertaining to English errors of their students. Several books (Kizuka & Northridge, 1997) (Ward, 1995) (Webb, 1991) and variety of articles - for example, (Hirose, 1998) ((Izzo, 1995) (Narita, 1997) - based upon classroom experiences have been published discussing errors made by Japanese college students. This article, however, will address the topic from a different prospective - the collective view of 34 professors teaching ESL writing courses at 20 universities throughout Japan.

Data Acquisition

The data used in this article was obtained from responses to a survey sent to 159 universities, public and private, throughout Japan. Questionnaires for English writing professors were incorporated into the survey. One survey item asked the EFL writing professors to list the most common errors made by their students. Although limited replies were received, 34 professors provided input that is being utilized in this article. The results of the data obtained are tabulated in Table 1 on the following page.

The reported errors are listed in the first column of the table. The second column indicates the number of times the error was reported. Since the respondents reported up to six errors the errors were rated according to the position that they were reported. Errors listed first were scored as 6, and errors listed sixth (last) were scored as 1. Other errors were scored according to the respective position in which they were reported.

Since the question was an open-ended, 40 different errors were reported. To reduce the number of items being considered, the errors were grouped in general categories whenever possible. Although the groupings are subjective and based upon the author's classification process, the process permitted reducing the categories of errors being considered to 18. Further categorization was possible, but this would have put too many errors into a single classification.

Reported Errors	Number	Score	Grouped Errors	Score	
articles	13	69	Sentence development	110	
subject-verb agreement	12	57	*fragments (because)*		*35*
paragraph devel-org-coh	10	46	*basic mechanics*		*12*
fragments (because)	7	35	*comma use*		*12*
verb tense	8	29	*fragments*		*11*
agreement verb tense	7	27	*word order*		*10*
word selection/use	7	26	*clause-no verb*		*10*
preposition selection	6	24	*word omission*		*9*
spelling	4	20	*clause structure*		*6*
conjunction misuse	4	17	*sentence structure*		*5*
almost	2	12	Agreement	96	
basic mechanics	2	12	*subject-verb*		*57*
comma use	2	12	*verb tense*		*27*
relative pronoun	3	12	*number*		*10*
fragments	3	11	*noun-pronoun*		*2*
plurals	2	11	Paragraph development	83	
verb form	2	11	*para devel-org-coh*		*46*
number agreement	2	10	*clarity*		*10*
clarity	2	10	*topic sentence*		*10*
clause-no verb	2	10	*details lacking*		*9*
gerund with to	3	10	*personalizing*		*5*
topic sentence	2	10	*simple sentence*		*3*
word order	2	10	Articles	69	
details lacking	2	9	Verb errors	62	
word omission	2	9	*tense*		*29*
active-passive	1	6	*active-passive voice*		*12*
clause structure	1	6	*form*		*11*
possessive pronoun	1	6	*gerund with to*		*10*
at first -first of all	1	5	Word selection/use	26	
noun-adjective confusion	1	5	Preposition selection	24	
personalizing	2	5	Nouns	20	
pre-nominal	1	5	*plurals*		*11*
sentence structure	1	5	*noun-adj confusion*		*5*
that	1	5	*noncount nouns*		*4*
carelessness	1	4	Spelling	20	
using contractions	1	4	Pronoun selection	18	
noncount nouns	1	4	*relative pronoun*		*12*
Janglish	1	4	*possessive pronoun*		*6*
simple sentence overuse	1	3	Conjunction misuse	17	
noun-pronoun agreement	1	2	Almost	6	
			At first-first of all	5	
			Pre-nominal	5	
			That	5	
			Carelessness	4	
			Using contractions	4	
			Janglish	4	
Totals	**127**	**578**		**578**	

Table 1

Data Analysis

A review of the tabulated data reveals that the most common Grouped Error category reported was **sentence development**. Nine Reported Error types were included in this category. It can be argued that other errors should be included. However, an attempt was made to evaluate whether reported errors best fit sentence, paragraph, or individual categories. Based on data reported and the author's personal experience and judgment, the errors were categorized as indicated in Table 1. *Fragments*, especially those involving "*because*," were noted to be a primary type of **sentence development** error. This error is likely due to the frequent use of fragmented "*because*" clauses in reply to "why" questions in spoken English. (Izzo, 1995)

The problems associated with writing **development** at the basic sentence level can be traced to the over-reliance on multiple choice questions to educate and test secondary school students. Multiple choice questions are used as primary educational tools because the main purpose of secondary school education is to prepare the students for college entrance examinations. (Goodman, 1993) This overuse of multiple choice questions hinders the acquisition of spoken and written English communicative skills.

The second most frequently reported error category was **agreement**. It should be noted that majority of errors in this group were *subject-verb agreement* errors. The score assigned to this specific error type could probably be somewhat higher because some of the *number agreement* errors most likely fall into this category. This error is probably due to the fact that in the Japanese language the present tense of a verb does not change with number. Therefore, adding an "s" to the present tense of most English verbs to obtain the third person singular form appears to be difficult for Japanese students to comprehend.

Paragraph development is another identified writing weakness of Japanese students. They have difficulty in presenting material in a logically organized and coherent manner that readers can readily understand. Native English speaking writers are taught to present

detailed information so that the readers will not be have to make interpretations that could result in misunderstanding of the material being presented. However, Japanese writers tend to write around the topic and leave the readers with the task of interpreting the writer's message. Japanese writers are also inclined to include comments about circumstantially related information. This often results in a writing that includes a broad range of material, much of which is not directly related to the topic of the writing.

As in most error analysis studies of Japanese writings, **articles** were a frequently reported error. Since the Japanese language does not have **articles** to contend with, they are an especially difficult problem for Japanese EFL students. Therefore, **articles** are consistently identified as a problem for all levels of EFL learners in Japan. The topic of **articles** is somewhat difficult to explain to Japanese EFL students, and the problems associated with their use can be corrected only through much study and frequent use of the English language.

Verb related errors are another category that the university professors frequently reported as a common error producer. *Verb tense* was identified as the most common type of error in this category. Other types of verb errors reported were *active-passive voice*, *verb form*, and the use of *to with a gerund*. Although *agreement noun-verb* and *agreement verb tense* also cross over into this category and could be considered as a part of this grouping, a separation was maintained in this review. Reduction of **verb errors** also requires EFL students to invest time and effort in their studies and to use English as frequently as possible.

Conclusion

Although no new error categories were reported in this article, it is important to note that the majority of the Reported Errors are related to **sentence** and **paragraph development**. The errors in these categories can not be corrected by the EFL teaching practices presently emphasized in the Japanese secondary education system. Current teaching practices concentrate on preparing students for university entrance examinations. These practices do not place

adequate emphasis on language learning activities that would be productive in developing communicative skills needed to significantly improve **sentence** and **paragraph development** proficiency.

Grammar exercises based upon selective answer testing are not an acceptable alternative for enhancing **sentence** and **paragraph development** skills of Japanese EFL students. These students must be given the opportunity to write in English and thus acquire the ability to develop and organize material. Without this opportunity, Japanese students will not develop their writing skills to a level that will permit them to become capable university level writers of English.

It should also be noted that over-reliance on multiple choice exercises and testing often extends into the Japanese university EFL classrooms. There are several possible reasons for this. First, it is the system under which many of the professors were educated, and therefore, are most familiar with. In addition, the use of multiple choice exercises and testing keeps the out-of-classroom workload of the language instructor at a much lower level than that associated with the checking of paragraph and essay level writings.

Due to the noted considerations, it is highly unlikely that the present EFL education practices will change significantly in the near future. Therefore, the communicative skills - especially writing skills - of Japanese university level students can not be expected to show any real improvement in the near future. Significant improvement in the EFL education system at the secondary school level is needed. In addition, university level EFL education needs to be evaluated and improved where required.

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